

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

FLU

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

What is flu?

Flu (short for “influenza”) is a very contagious disease of the body’s respiratory (breathing) system. Flu symptoms include sudden fever, cough, muscle aches, headache and general weakness. Flu usually also causes runny nose and sore throat. These symptoms can range from very mild to very severe. Diarrhea, nausea and vomiting are not signs of influenza in adults.

Is flu dangerous?

It can be. Most people are sick for only a few days. Some people, however, may develop pneumonia. Every year in the U.S., flu causes thousands of hospital admissions and deaths, mostly among the elderly, young children, pregnant women, and people with chronic medical problems and weakened immune systems.

How is flu spread?

The viruses that cause flu live in the nose and throat and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. People nearby can then breathe in the virus. Flu symptoms usually start 1 to 4 days after a person breathes in the virus. Adults with the flu can spread it from 1 day before symptoms appear to 1 week after. Children can spread the flu even longer after they get sick.

How is flu treated?

Bed rest, plenty of fluids and non-aspirin pain relievers help most people feel better. However, children and teens with the flu should never take aspirin, because a rare but serious disease called Reye syndrome can occur in young people who take aspirin when they have the flu. Prescription drugs, called antiviral agents, can be used to prevent or treat the flu. These drugs can cause side effects in some people. You should talk to your doctor or nurse about taking these drugs.

Can I protect myself from getting the flu?

Yes. Flu vaccine can prevent the flu. There are 2 types of flu vaccine – a flu injection (or shot) and a nasal spray. Flu viruses change often, so last year’s vaccine will not protect you this year. You must get flu vaccine every year. It is very important that people who are at risk (see below), and the people who take care of or live with them, get flu vaccine every year. Handwashing is also important to prevent spread of germs.

Who should get flu vaccine?

Anyone who wants to avoid getting the flu should get flu vaccine. The nasal spray flu vaccine is only for healthy people 5 – 49 years old. Everyone else should get a flu shot. It is especially important that the people listed below get a flu shot every year.

- Children 6 months to 59 months old.
- Everyone 50 years of age or older.
- Anyone 6 months to 49 years of age who falls into one of the groups below:
 - Residents of long-term care facilities.
 - People with heart disease, cystic fibrosis, asthma or other lung diseases.
 - People with kidney disease; diabetes or other metabolic diseases; sickle cell anemia and other blood diseases.
 - People with weakened immune systems (for example, by cancer treatment, or HIV/AIDS).
 - Women who will be pregnant during flu season.
 - People with certain muscle or nerve disorders (such as seizure disorders or severe cerebral palsy) that can lead to breathing or swallowing problems.
 - Children (6 months to 18 years old) who regularly take aspirin. These people may be at risk of getting Reye syndrome, a disease that causes coma, liver damage and death.
 - Health care workers, emergency response workers, staff of assisted living residences, home care workers,

and household and family members who might spread flu to someone at risk (listed above) can get either a flu shot or the nasal spray vaccine. However, people who live with or take care of someone with an immune system so weak that they need a special protective environment should get a flu shot, not the nasal spray vaccine.

How safe is the flu shot?

Most people who get a flu shot have no problems from it. The most common side effect is a sore arm that lasts 1 or 2 days. A few people have mild fever, headache, chills, or muscle aches for 2 days. More serious reactions are rare. Modern flu shots have not been linked to Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), a rare nerve disorder. If there is a risk of GBS from current influenza vaccines, it is much less than the risk of severe flu, which can be prevented by the flu shot. The flu shot cannot give you the flu.

Who should NOT get flu vaccine?

Infants younger than 6 months of age and people with a severe allergic (anaphylactic) reaction to eggs or to a previous dose of flu vaccine should not receive a flu shot. People with a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome should talk to their doctor or nurse.

The following people should get a flu shot, not the nasal spray: People younger than 5 or older than 49 years of age; people who have weakened immune systems and their close contacts; pregnant women, people with asthma or other similar diseases; and people with health problems that put them at risk (listed above).

When should I get flu vaccine?

In New England, flu season usually begins in December and lasts through March. Flu vaccine is usually given in the fall before flu season starts. If you are 50 years or older, or you have one of the conditions listed above, call your doctor or local board of health to get flu vaccine in October or November. If you are a healthy person younger than 50 years old who wants to avoid getting the flu, you can wait until November or December to get the vaccine. Because flu season lasts until March, December or even later is not too late to get the vaccine.

What if I'm traveling?

If you are in one of the groups listed above and plan to travel to the tropics, travel anywhere with a large tourist group, or travel to the Southern Hemisphere between April and September, you should talk to your doctor or nurse about getting a flu shot or about whether you should bring medication with you.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic, or your local board of health (listed in the phone book under local government).
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Immunization Program (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850, or on the MDPH website at www.mass.gov/dph/.

Northeast Regional Office	Tewksbury	(978) 851-7261
Central Regional Office	West Boylston	(508) 792-7880
Southeast Regional Office	Taunton	(508) 977-3709
Metro/Boston* Regional Office	Jamaica Plain	(617) 983-6860
Western Regional Office	Amherst	(413) 545-6600

*Boston providers and residents may also call the Boston Public Health Commission at (617) 534-5611.

- **CDC National Immunization Information Hotline**
CDC-INFO 1-800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636) 1-888-232-6348 TTY 24 Hours/Day
E-mail Address: cdcinfo@cdc.gov